BEGINNER

LEAD GUITAR 101

Bluesy Sliding Sixths

BY ANDY ELLIS

Once you know a few tricks using major and minor sixths, you'll be able to lay down soulful grooves and craft hooky riffs that are equally melodic and harmonic. Playing sixths, you can move along the fretboard with the alacrity of a lead guitarist, yet sketch chords with the flair of a Memphis horn section. Sliding sixths play a crucial role in honky tonk, R&B, blues, and soul, so we'll devote several lessons to this sassy sound.

Phil Upchurch grooving in the early '70s.

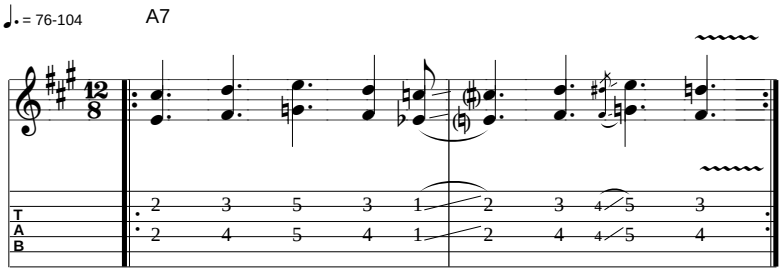
First, a quick refresher: A major sixth is an interval composed of nine half-steps; a minor sixth comprises eight half-steps. Musically, these are large intervals. Composed entirely of major and minor sixths fretted on the second and fourth strings, Ex. 1 is a classic comping pattern set to a swampy 12/8 meter. In the hands of such studio greats as Cornell Dupree, Eric Gale, and Phil Upchurch, these moves recall rollicking gospel or boogie piano. That's due to the 5-6-♭7-6 (E, F♯, G, F♯, relative to A7) sequence in the bottom voice. This stepwise line is the cornerstone of funky music, regardless of style or era.

You'll notice there are two flavors of slides in this passage—the more pronounced eighth-note move linking bar 1 to bar 2, and the sleazy grace-note slide in bar 2. For variety, try inserting each type at different points of this recurring two-bar phrase.

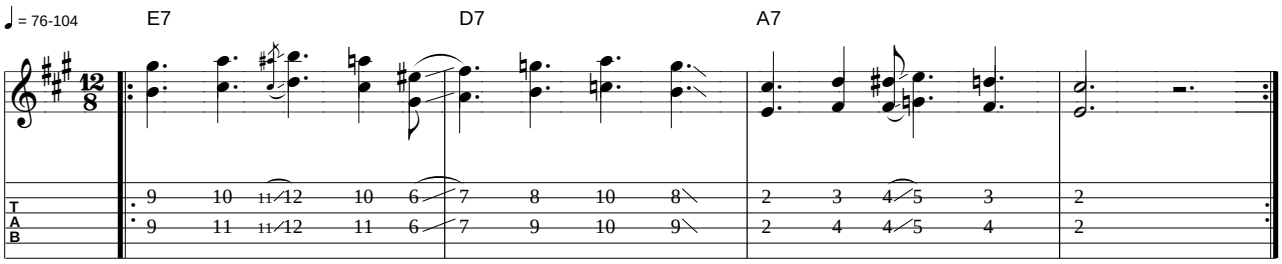
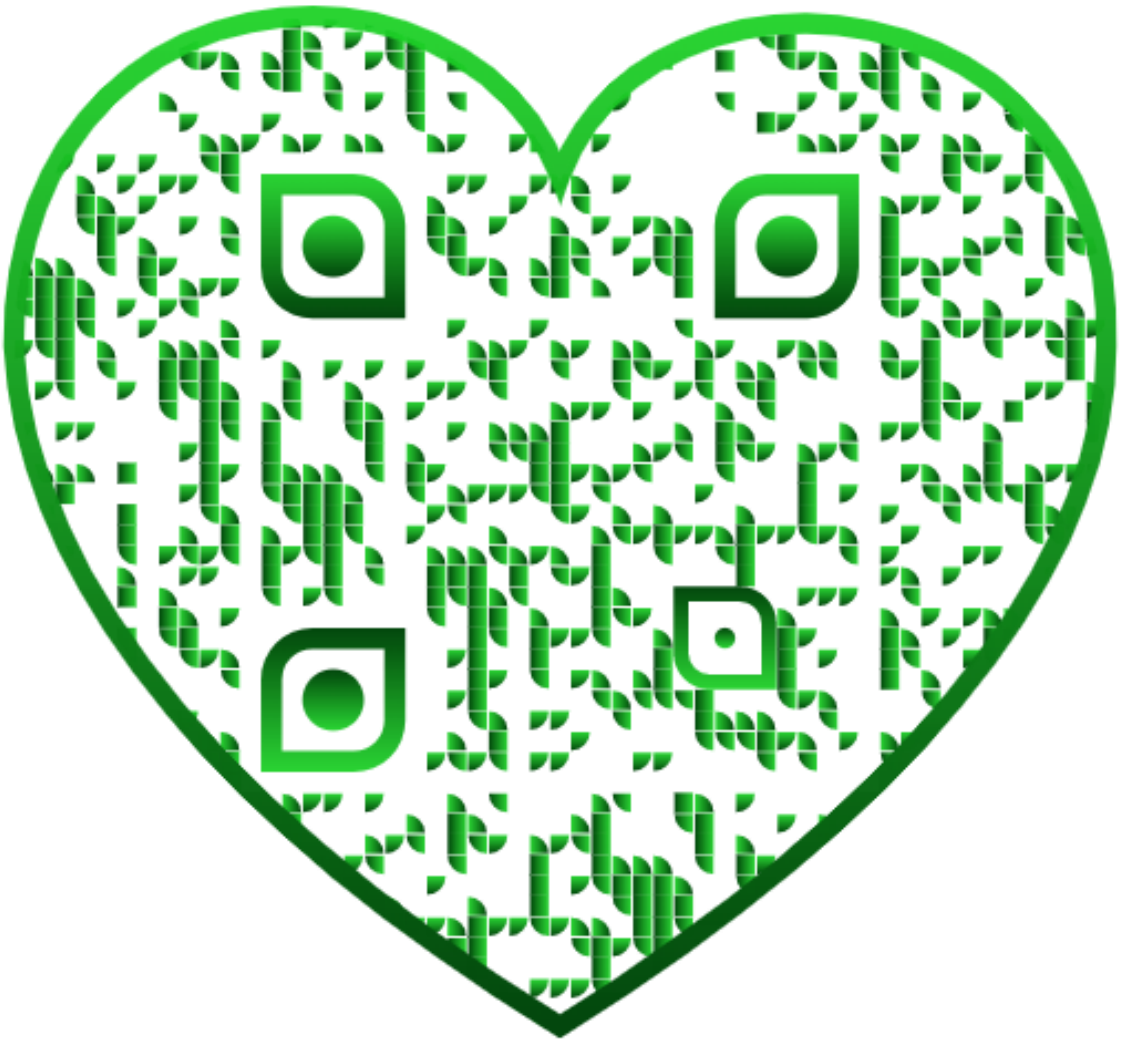
Ex. 2 shows how you can apply our sixth pattern to a V-IV-I progression in the key of A. In this four-bar phrase, listen for the 5-6-♭7-6 line as it unfolds below E7, D7, and A7, respectively. Three slides and a downward gliss (bar 2, beat four) provide additional sauce. Tasty!

Next time: Flipped bluesy sixths.

EX. 1



EX. 2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